PRESCRIPTION FOR GREATNESS
Isaiah 53:10-12
Mark 10:35-45
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This is a sermon about status/status symbols: it is about greatness as that word is defined by the world and as it has been redefined by our Lord Jesus Christ. And I would begin by sharing with you the opening narrative of a recently published book "LOCKED-OUT AMERICANS", by John R. Fry. Read from Book

A young Stone, no more than eleven years old - a "Junebug" - walked west on 47th Street near Ellis Avenue, Chicago, one afternoon after school. It was March, 1969. He wore old pants, a thin jacket, sneakers, no socks, and a brilliant red felt beret. He would not call it a red beret or even a hat. It was a "sun." He would insist it be called a sun. It announced he was not an ordinary ghetto kid; he was a member of the Black P. Stone Nation. He might hav been picking up some groceries for his mother, or going to hang for a while with the brothers at the candy store. He probably wouldn't get his business done, whatever it was. That sun on his head was a sure ticket to a hassle and perhaps a trip to the Prairie Avenue Police Station.

A blue-and-white squad car of the Chicago Police Department was cruising eastbound on 47th Street. The patrolmen in the car spotted the Stone on the other side of the street. They slowed down, both looking at him, then made an abrupt U-turn. Headed west, they moved up slowly alongside the boy. The patrolman nearest him rolled down the car window and said something. The Stone did not look toward the car or stop walking. That obviously wouldn't do. The policemen stopped the car and got out, putting their hats on as they walked up behind him. Policeman number one reached him first, grabbed his shoulder roughly, and spun him around to face them.

I couldn't hear what they were saying. I was on the other side of the street in my car. I had seen the incident arising and thought the kid might need some eyewitness, so had stopped to watch. Clearly the police were saying something to the boy; as clearly, the boy was not responding. He stood there waiting to turn around and continue on to wherever he was going. After a minute or so of this one-way conversation the first policeman suddenly grabbed the sun and threw it down onto the sidewalk, covered as it was with March slush and mud. Then he stepped on the sun and smeared it around in the goop. Satisfied, he looked up at the Stone. He was looking at his sun. He bent down and picked it up and put it on his head at about the same rakish angle. The slush began to run down the sides of his head and onto his face as he turned and continued westward.

The two policemen stared at the boy walking away from them. They looked at each other. Firmer steps seemed called for. They went after the boy. Policeman number two this time reached the boy first and grabbed him around the neck with both hands. He was shaking the Stone and choking him. There was a kind of exasperation in the effort. "Why won't this kid break?" When the patrolman had finished, the boy half stumbled out of the grasp but didn't fall - or massage his necks muscles. Both policemen walked around in front of the boy. Policeman number two pointed back down the sidewalk where the confrontation had begun. The boy didn't look back. He still had not spoken a word to them. The second policeman took the muddy sun and smashed the thing right into the gutter, where, added to the sidewalk goop was broken glass, a lot more water, plus the usual stuff which makes Chicago gutters so much resemble sewers, such as candy-bar wrappers, dead rats, beer cans, orange peels, doll arms, bottle caps, half burned telephone books, cigarette butts, and the like. The gesture was the kind

you have seen Oliver Hardy make. It said, "What are you going to do about *that*, you dumb kid?" Clearly agitated, the policeman stepped on the sun, and almost as an afterthought, tromped it through some broken glass to the bottom of the gutter.

The Stone watched. When he believed the policeman had finished, he stepped away from the, squatted beside the gutter and felt around for his sun. As he lifted it out, it dripped with muddy water. It had been torn by the broken glass. Instead of emptying it onto the sidewalk, he placed it on his head again, this time giving no attention to the cool angle. The slime oozed down. He made no move to wipe it away. He said nothing. He looked straight ahead as he wheeled and began walking away. The policemen watched him go. A few moments later they returned to the car and after making a wide U-turn, continued cruising eastbound.

That rather dramatic illustration holds up the importance of status as a way of affirming selfhood. It identifies a symbol of status - in this case a red beret - as the expression of a value system, for that is really what status symbols are - reflections of the values by which men live. In addition, it is a clear picture of a common truth, namely, that value systems and their accompanying signs or symbols are the vehicles men use to give meaning to their lives. In Fry's book - the only means in the likes of many young men in the ghetto - is the gang - the symbol is all important.

Greatness - status - and their visible symbols: this is no light, airy subject: and this sermon will try not to be a broadside against the petty egotism that seems always to be a part of the human condition. Rather, I would hope we might find ourselves dealing this morning with the very essence of manhood - and the particularly Christian contribution to the subject. But before we become too sociological let's hear the Bible on the topic.

I read this morning from that portion of Isaiah which is called the Servant Song. In it, the prophet, writing to a group of his countrymen exiled in Babylon, pulls together two rather alien ideas - servanthood and greatness. After a lengthy description of how the Lord's servant must suffer, the prophet says: "Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong." Now, we are accustomed to hearing those words; but let me emphasize that if you are a Jew whose homeland has been ravished, whose nation has been conquered, whose suffering has been stretched across the centuries, the idea that suffering servanthood is, in fact, synonymous with greatness, is startling and radical and rather revolutionary.

The New Testament lesson, in turn, says the same thing, a little more subtly. At first glance it is tempting to read in it a plea for non-status, the rejection of all symbols of status. But that's not what Jesus said at all.

It's a familiar passage. On the way to Jerusalem, James and John asked Jesus a favor: they wanted to sit at his right and left, in Mark's phrase "in your glory." Now let's not fall prey to the common mistake of spiritualizing everything the disciples said. They weren't talking about heaven. There is every reason to believe that at this point in time the twelve friends of Jesus were assuming that they would shortly be occupying the seats of power in Jerusalem. These were very human, ambitious men, on their way to a political coup detat, and when it happened they wanted to be sure they had a piece of the action. When he was king, they wanted to be his Regent and Chancelor.

Jesus' response is interesting: "Are you sure you know what you are asking? Are you sure you can stand with me in the days ahead? Whatever glory that is coming to me will be bought at a very dear price." "We are able," they answered, and significantly both James and John died as martyrs according to tradition.

In any case, the other ten became a little upset at the arrogance and presumptiousness of their collegues: or was it jealousy? And so Jesus sat them down to learn a lesson: a lesson he had tried to teach before and would try to teach again: a lesson rooted in the long ago letter written by the Prophet to their exiled forefathers. Greatness is serving: serving is greatness.

"You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them," he said. There is a sting in that "supposed to rule". The ancient historian Tacitus records the rampant corruption among Minor Roman officials, complete with records of their trials and convictions. The Jews knew how empty political status could be when it became synonymous with bribery, deception, corruption.

"Well", Jesus said, "that's not the way it is with you. Nor is it the way God sees it". "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be a slave of all."

The subtle significance here is in what Jesus did not say. He did not land all over over the disciples for wanting to be great: he didn't criticize them for lusting after status and the symbols of status. In fact he seems to have been saying that the desire is normal, healthy, positive. What he did was totally reverse the definition of greatness ans status, so that losers come out winners and the slaves come out on the top of the heap.

He inverted the entire social pyramid with one fell swoop, in a way that was radical and revolutionary - and still is.

In light of that, in light of what he said about greatness and status let's return now to our situation. Much has been made of our obsession with status. cite Vance Packard In our culture the possession of certain commonly accepted symbols of status is one of the most powerful motivational forces going. Advertising depends on it: one of the clearest messages we receive from television commercials is that this product will produce status, or at least envy in the hearts of our neighbors. Someone has defined an American as "a person who borrows money he can't pay back to buy something he doesn't need to impress someone he doesn't like." ~~(Alive Now, November - 73, P. 12)~~

The typical religious response to this is to be critical of status seeking per se, to allign religion against the common desire for greatness. And that is wrong - if Jesus meant what he said to the disciples it is wrong, and its perpetuation by well meaning souls is one of the reasons the real world simply doesn't listen when Christians begin talking.

The fact is that status - and status seeking is part of the human situation. Even in the church: even in monastic orders founded on the principle of non-status and humility. Even in communism, ideologically based on absolute egalitaranism there is a drive to succeed, to climb the ladder, to get there. Status seeking is part of the human condition

Sophisticated executives in business know its reality and power: they know the meaning of an office of one's own, with a carpet: they know the existential force of having one's own key to the executive rest room. In the rarefied atmosphere of academia the symbols differ but the seeking of status remains in the form of degress, published articles in scholarly journals and fat consulting fees. Even ministers - although propriety mitigates against driving cadillacs - have their symbols of status: professors with whom I am on a first name basis; schools I've attended; sanctuaries I have filled. It's part of our life: there's no getting away from it. I've been introudced to people as a Presbyterian minister who ask if I'm with the downtown church, and who seem genuinely disappointed when I say no. But recently, as it was happening, the person who introduced me said, "But, he spent the summer in Scotland." ~~A little~~ Status crept back in. I was amused at my own culpability afterward, because having been given ~~a little status~~ an opening I . -

proceeded to wade right into a few rounds of "when we were in Stonehenge this summer", - and it felt pretty good. Among many other symbols of status, travel is a "comer" I am discovering.

So it's part of us: we need something by which to affirm who we are. The Rev. Jesse Jackson who used to head-up Operation Bread Basket on the South Side of Chicago, began his Saturday morning meetings with the "lower than poor" by walking to the podium, looking at his audience and saying "I" - they answered in one voice "I": "am" - "am": "sombody" - "somebody": and the auditorium would erupt.

We need to affirm that we are: that we have identity: that we matter. We need symbols that reflect our value system, and that will, in turn, give meaning to our lives. And it is precisely at this point that we are confronted and judged by the word of God: not for our need - not for wanting status: not for pursuing greatness: but for using the wrong definitions, for allowing our culture to define what greatness is, and thereby turning our backs on God's definition.

That's our sin, essentially: putting our eggs in the wrong basket: allowing culture, peer group, other people to assume God's place. Playing to the wrong gallery, that is to say. For ultimately we are accountable to Him: and He has told us the basis on which He measures us. The word is service: servanthood. To be a Christian is to repent, to turn around, to be converted: and it involves changing some working definitions. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant." not simple spiritual upheaval - rather changing

Now "service" has become an amorphous, vague word. We have "Service Clubs": "Worship Services": we get our automobiles "serviced". What does it mean really, "to serve"? The New Testament word is realted to ministry - which always points in the direction of identifying with people where they are. Service begins, then, at the feeling level. If you are going to serve others you have to be able to feel with them.

And at this particular point in time the ability to feel with others - the willingness to bear in one's heart the pain of other people - is something our nation desparately needs. It's not easy anymore. Pictures of starving children don't grip us the way they used to because we've seen it so often. Television has brought so much suffering into our living rooms that we have begun to protect ourselves from it; we build invisible defense

barriers to keep out pain and starvation and poverty. The news has been so consistantly bad recently that the natural reaction is to shut it out. Time carried a cartoon last week ~~recently~~ that said it all. A man and woman are cowering behind the couch, quivering in fear as the announcer intones, "And Now for the Evening News."

So I think it is the calling, and the burden, of the Christian to hold on to sensitivity - the ability to feel - for dear life: I think it is our calling to feel the pain in our bodies when we know someone is hurting; to weep when we see tragedy; to rage in anger when politicians make a mockery of our trust, our laws, our constitution. I think it is our burden, alone, to reject the overwhelmingly tempting retreat into emotional numbness.

Service begins with feeling, identifying with, assuming as one's own - the pain of others. And if that's what it means to be called a bleeding heart, so be it; because it is our Lord who calls us to it. That's where it begins, and it proceeds as we roll up our sleeves and go to work; when the life we have been given to live begins to find its meaning in the other lives it helps. - not what you have collected - but how you have helped ..

That's God's definition of status. ~~And~~ In Jesus Christ he has given us a model. George Peters put it this way:

> "If you have any comprehension of the being and nature of glory of God, then the fact that he dwelt among us to serve us ought to overwhelm us, stagger us, take our breath away." ~~(The Protestant Hour: P.60)~~

The incarnation: the coming of God almighty to dwell among us happened, after all, not in a palace nursery, but in a dirty cow stall: and it was consumated, not on the throne of David but on a cross, between two thieves.

There is a line somewhere in Robert Frost that goes "I bid you to a one-man revolution." So - I bid you this morning. God calls us - not to abject humility, not to lowliness and self debasement, but to status - to greatness. And in Jesus Christ he has offered a brand new definition of what that means.

It seems to me that an awful lot depends on grasping that....

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant." AMEN

Father, it is good to know that you smile on our desire to be great: our need to have status. Help us as we turn upside down our comfortable definitions of those words: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN